

St. Johns board votes to issue the Final SEIS on the flood control project

By Liz Anderson

The St. Johns Levee and Drainage District board Tuesday morning voted unanimously -- with two members on the telephone from Florida -- to proceed with the authorized plan for the St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway flood control project, with the levee closure at its 1,500-foot authorized location.

The motion, made by Furg S. Hunter, Jr., seconded by John Joe Bryant, was to request Congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson to ask Assistant Secretary of the Army Michael Parker to instruct the Army Corps of Engineers to issue the "Final" (Revised Supplemental) Environmental Impact Study on the project as soon as possible and to present it to the decision-maker (B.G. Edward Arnold) for the Record of Decision.

Once the Final RSEIS is issued, the Corps can seek Water Quality Certification from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

St. Johns members Jim Bogle and Dee Dill participated in the meeting via a conference call. The others met at Lynn Bock's office in New Madrid.

The move may put to an end an unproductive two or more years of negotiating with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

It came after a meeting in Washington, D.C. February 21 between Parker and his counterparts in the various other federal agencies, including the Office of Management and Budget, EPA and the Fish and

Wildlife Service.

During that meeting, Parker offered, as a final negotiating point and with the knowledge of the St. Johns board, to move the levee closure from its authorized position (the 1,500-foot gap) up into the floodway. (Position No. 2 in this year's "final" study - 2.2 miles up from the authorized closure location).

Although information from the Washington meeting is sketchy, at best, it was reported to us that the agencies all agreed to "sign off on the project" with that compromise, but that Parker wanted the "agreement" in writing.

Following the meeting February 21, officials from the Department of the Interior, of which Fish and Wildlife is a part, indicated they were going to mail their comments on February 27.

But in the following week, we learned that EPA was still dissatisfied, and was continuing to threaten to "elevate" the St. Johns project to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) -- an agency that has been involved with the negotiations for at least the last two years.

The comment period for the project was supposed to end December 17, 2001, but upon the request of the EPA and Fish and Wildlife Service, the comment period was extended by the Corps of Engineers an additional 15 days.

At the end of that time, Parker gave the two agencies another 30-day extension, and then another 30-day extension of the comment period, that

was -- finally -- to have expired February 28.

It was privately reported Monday that Parker had granted the EPA one more seven-day extension to comment on the project, until March 7, and that the comments of the Fish and Wildlife Service were not mailed on February 27.

Bock said Tuesday, that the Memphis District Corps of Engineers has indicated they can issue the Final SEIS within 60 days.

If EPA refers the study to CEQ, CEQ has the authority to do one of four things: 1) nothing; 2) let the project go forward; 3) tell everyone to go back and negotiate as they did last year, or 4) say the project is dead.

As far as moving the levee closure up into the floodway, there are two unresolved questions with that, i.e. whether or not the Corps has the authorization to move it without additional Congressional action, and whether or not the project would still be economically feasible.

At the Mississippi River Commission public hearing Monday morning at Cairo, Dr. Martha Ellen Black, executive director of the Susanna Wesley Family Learning Center and partner with the East Prairie Enterprise Community, asked the Corps to hold every agency as well as communities to the same regulations.

There should be no extensions to well-publicized comment periods, she said. The same rules should apply to everyone.

"I urge you to find a way to hold other government agencies responsible for following age-old procedural processes," she said.

Also at that meeting, Jerry Vineyard, Interstate Rivers Director "representing Director Steve Mahfood," with the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, urged the Corps to go forward with the project and to go into construction as soon as possible.

He said "the project has been long delayed, and I understand the frustration of the local people. You have the solution within your grasp, and need to get the project moving. Get it going," Vineyard said.

Lloyd Smith, Emerson's Chief of Staff, asked Gen. Arnold "to sign a Record of Decision on the St. Johns-New Madrid project.

"It is my hope that we can break ground before October 2002. I know this is an ambitious timeline, but the time for flood protection for the folks

of Scott, Mississippi and New Madrid counties is now -- our folks have waited long enough.

"Let's make 2002 the year that makes the difference in the lives and livelihoods of the folks in this section of Southern Missouri," Smith concluded.

MRC TESTIMONY

At right is Jerry Vineyard, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, "representing Director Steve Mahfood", who urged the Corps of Engineers to "get on with" the St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway flood control project during Monday's Mississippi River Commission public hearing in Cairo. Photos by Liz Anderson

